

VZCZCXYZ0024

RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBS #4099/01 3461643
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 121643Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3839
INFO RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 0530
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS BRUSSELS 004099

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KISL](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [BE](#)

SUBJECT: MUSLIM ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2006-2007 FOR BELGIUM

REF: STATE 185834

Background

11. (U) The Muslim populace in Belgium, a country of just over 10 million people, forms nearly five percent of the total population. Although the Government of Belgium does not keep statistics on ethnicity or religion, most estimates for the total population of Muslims in Belgium range from 450,000 to 500,000. The largest representations of Muslims in Belgium are from Morocco (approximately 300,000) and Turkey (roughly 160,000).

12. (U) Muslim integration and participation in Belgian society, like elsewhere in Europe, is an evolving and complex issue. In some communities, there are now three or more generations of Muslims: foreign-born grandparents who migrated to Belgium during the '60s and their Belgian-born children and grandchildren. Muslim integration into other cultures and societies has not always been easy. Some Muslims face documented discrimination in employment or housing as well as social prejudice based upon a combination of complex factors that may include: family name, outward religious symbols (such as a veil or scarf), or a perceived desire to "remain separate" or even a "refusal" to integrate.

13. (SBU) Some far-right parties, most notably the Flemish Vlaams Belang, have anti-immigrant elements as part of their platforms. The party has earned up to 25 percent of the vote in Antwerp and it remains a very real force in Flemish politics. In Wallonia, so far the gains of extreme right party the Front National have been limited (15 percent of the vote in industrial city of Charleroi) mainly because of poor tactics and legal restraints on party activities, not entirely because of a lack of public receptiveness to their message. As a result even some mainstream Belgian politicians, sensitive to their constituencies, have taken a harder line against immigrant communities. Whether the perception is real or not, there are some Belgians who do feel threatened by concentrations of "non-Western foreigners" who have different customs and values and who stand out as separate from the relatively homogeneous society.

14. (SBU) Belgium is further burdened with a very complex political system. It is a federal state with three regions: Flanders in the north where Dutch is the official language; Wallonia in the south where French is the official language and Brussels, the capital, where French and Dutch are both official

languages. In addition, there is a small German-speaking minority of 70,000 in the south. The regions are empowered with a high level of autonomy, especially in the educational and cultural spheres. Many Moroccan immigrants can be found in Brussels and in the Walloon region while Turks often settle in Flanders. Integration policies differ from region to region with Flanders adopting what many Belgians consider a more "Anglo-Saxon" integration model, Wallonia following the French example and Brussels, a mix of the two. Neither system has worked well. Muslims in urban centers face high unemployment, particularly among the youth. All non-EU nationals, including Muslims, have higher rates of unemployment than their EU citizen counterparts. Muslim immigrants are often further handicapped by limited education or language proficiency in Belgium's two official languages. These very real educational and socio-economic factors can inhibit full integration.

15. (U) Embassy Brussels has been actively engaging the Belgian Muslim community since early 2002. Post soon discovered that there was nothing to be gained by discussing foreign policy. This would only exacerbate their suspicion and confirm their negative images about the U.S. and the U.S.G. in particular. Instead, Post focused on issues that affected them most, namely, religion and empowerment. In 2002 ? 2003, the Embassy-invited speakers such as Imam Yahya Hendi, civil rights leader Rev. Soaries, and "Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights" founder Azizah Al-Hibri were all extremely well-received. In 2004, a first ever Iftar dinner was organized by the Ambassador. Based on this experience, the Embassy organized a major conference which brought together an impressive group of 32 American Muslims to meet with an equally impressive group of 65 Belgian Muslims to discuss everyday, practical matters regarding Muslim participation in society. This two-day conference, titled "Muslim Communities Participating in Society: A Belgian-U.S. Dialogue" took place in Brussels on November 16 & 17, 2005 and was highly successful. It built trust and constituted a tremendous boost to our credibility with this highly critical, suspicious and sometimes even hostile audience.

16. (U) This dialogue, in turn, led to a number of follow-on initiatives which Post promised it would help materialize. Some of the follow-on activities have taken place already such as Belgian participation in the ISNA Education Forum (April 2006), Belgian participation in the Karamah leadership program (July 2006), and a one-day seminar on Media Portrayal of Minorities (June 2006). Others will take place throughout 2007. In order to maintain the momentum of this goodwill and our credibility, we must continue the dialogue with moderate Belgian Muslims, and expand our contact base, as we continue these follow-on initiatives. Our Muslim strategy for the future, therefore, will reflect this.

17. (U) The Embassy also works closely (and will continue to work closely) with the Muslim Executive Council which was founded by Royal decree in 1998 and which consists of a 17-member "Executive" and a 68-member "General Assembly", all of whom are elected by the Muslim communities of Belgium (the elections for the current Executive and Assembly took place in March, 2005). The Muslim Executive of Belgium is officially recognized as the interlocutor for the Belgian authorities (a) at the federal level, to deal with the administrative management of the religion (nominations of imams and chaplains, management of local communities), and (b) at the regional level, with regard to Islamic education (appointment and inspection of Islam teachers, curriculum oversight, etc.).

¶18. (SBU) As the October 2006 local elections in Belgium demonstrated once again, Belgian Muslims have become a real political force and the Embassy works with Muslim members of Parliament and local government on a variety of political issues. Also, whenever there's a crisis affecting the Muslim communities (e.g., the Cartoon crisis), the Embassy is able to draw on its Muslim conference alumni and Muslim political contacts to obtain first-hand information on the reactions inside the various Muslim communities.

Negative Narrative:

¶19. (SBU) Overcoming suspicions of mainstream as well as Muslim audiences: The integration (or lack thereof) of Muslim communities in Belgian society is a very sensitive topic. The Embassy's engagement with Belgian Muslims is seen by some members of the majority community, and some Muslims also, as interference in Belgium's internal affairs; a majority of Belgian Muslims remain highly suspicious of the USG. Yet, more and more Belgians, including Muslims, see the U.S. model as a better example for integrating minorities than most European countries. We will therefore continue to inform Muslim as well as mainstream Belgian audiences about America's experience in dealing with multicultural issues.

¶10. (SBU) By doing so we not only hope to advance the integration of Muslims into Belgian society but also increase our credibility with both Muslims and mainstream Belgians with the ultimate goal of creating a more positive image of the US, its policies, society, and values.

Media Environment:

¶11. (U) Brussels has a complex media climate. As the capital of Europe, Brussels hosts one of the largest press contingents in the world, with more than 1,000 accredited journalists. The media we wish to reach are those who cover the problems of this small country which straddles the Anglo-Saxon/Latin divide in Europe. In fact, it often seems that from a public diplomacy point of view, Belgium is really two countries -- Dutch speaking Flanders and French speaking Wallonia -- united by little more than the King, the postal system, the railroads, and social security. Each language group marches to a different drummer. The Dutch-language press is more often than not inspired by the Anglo-Saxon media; the Francophones take their cues from Paris. Issues that make prominent headlines in one media may, or may not, merit mention in the other. Depending on one's expectations, one might be surprised either by the magnitude of the gap between the two linguistic communities or by the fact that they manage to coexist in a more or less harmonious fashion.

¶12. (U) State-owned radio and television stations RTBF and VRT, which historically ran closely associated French-language and Dutch-language operations, have long become completely independent from each other. The only vestige of their common past is that they share the same premises and some technical installations. The other television stations, RTL/TVI and AB3 on the French-language side, VTM and VT4 on the Dutch-language side are completely independent from each other.

¶13. (U) Belgium has a very well-developed information network. There are some 20 dailies, with a combined circulation of some 1,700,000, and numerous periodicals. Several dozens of local low-powered FM radio stations are in operation. Four state-owned television channels broadcast in Belgium -- two

francophone (RTBF) and two Dutch-language (VRT) -- in addition to one independent francophone channel (RTL/TVI) and two independent Dutch-language channels (VTM and VT4). All have editorial autonomy. Legislation governing the broadcast industry is different for the French and Dutch-language sectors, since it is determined by the two language communities and not the national government.

¶14. (U) Almost 100 percent of Belgian homes subscribe to cable and, depending on the region they live in, are able to receive TV broadcasts from England (BBC 1 and 2; ITV and Channel 4 also in the coastal area), France (TF1, France 2, France 3, Arte and TV5), Germany (ARD, ZDF and WDR), Italy (RAI), the Netherlands (Holland 1, 2 and 3), Spain (TVE), Portugal (TPE), Turkey (TRT) and the USA (CNN). In addition, there are several local TV stations -- such as, for instance, TV Bruxelles/TV Brussels for the Brussels region -- as well as economic stations (Canal Z, CNBC.)

Strategic Goals:

¶15. (SBU) OVERALL GOAL: Improving understanding and perception of the United States, its society, its values and its policies by

- Deepening of already existing relationships within the Muslim communities of Belgium
- Widening of our network of Muslim contacts with more focus on youth
- Maintaining the dialogue about integration between Belgian Muslim and non-Muslim communities

Top Humanitarian Assistance Goal: N/A

Target Audiences and suggested programs for each Strategic Goal:

Goal 1: Deepening of already existing relationships within the Muslim communities of Belgium

Target Audience: Members of the Muslim Executive Council and Muslim community leaders (including political leaders, businessmen, imams, political activists, journalists, NGO leaders, educators and field workers and other multipliers). Their perception of our activities shapes the way the members of their communities view our outreach efforts, which in turn determines the level of access and success we can have.

Suggested Programs:

- Inviting Muslims and other minorities to various Mission events, not only Muslim-oriented events: All Mission elements will continue to include Muslim contacts on guest lists for representational events as appropriate.
- Bringing over American Muslim speakers: Both in-depth discussions with past speakers who have successfully engaged with Belgian Muslims, and bringing over new speakers who can elaborate on issues of genuine interest to the community (e.g., Post has re-invited Karamah Founder Azizah Al-Hibri to come to Belgium in May 2007).
- Sending Belgian community leaders to the U.S. on IV, Volvis, and other exchange programs;
- Co-sponsoring (with the Islamic Society of North America, one of our 2005 conference participants) travel by five Belgian imams to attend ISNA's Summer Imam training program in Chicago.

Goal 2: Widening our network of Muslim contacts

Target Audience: Youth

The Muslim population in Belgium is young: up to 35% is less than 18 years old and with a population growth rate significantly greater than that of the majority Belgian community, the number of Muslim youth in Belgium is growing rapidly. Most of them suffer a serious identity crisis feeling alienated both at home (Belgium) as well as in the country of their families' origin where most of them return every summer. In addition, these youth are disadvantaged in comparison with their Belgian peers: not only are they less likely to succeed in the secondary school system, much less likely to pursue post-secondary education, and even less likely to find a job, they are already economically disadvantaged to start with. 38.7% of Turkish immigrants and 25% of people with a Moroccan background have to make ends meet with less than 500 euros (\$664) each month. These findings are even more staggering when compared to European poverty line set at a monthly income of 777 euros (\$1,033) per month. Thus, almost 60% of people of Turkish descent and 55% of people of Moroccan descent are living in poverty. Those who feel the impact of poverty the most are the young. It is critical, therefore, that we concentrate more on reaching out to younger generations in order to counter the spread of extremism.

Note: Belgian youth in general, not only minority youth, will take a more important place in the Mission's public diplomacy efforts so that Muslim youth will not only be targeted with specific programs, through specific channels, but also through programs addressed to youth in general.

Suggested Programs:

- Setting up a network of young people who can serve as multipliers as we develop outreach programs to improve their image of the US. In order to achieve this, a mix of outreach tools would be used, including speaker programs, cultural events and educational exchanges mainly through IV and/or VOLVIS grants.
- Empowering existing youth organizations to make them more efficient by bringing over their peers from the U.S. to share experiences and successful programs.
- Co-sponsoring (w/ISNA) six Belgian youth (three Turkish, three Moroccan) as summer interns at ISNA Headquarters.
- Co-sponsoring (w/KARAMAH) a delegation of five young women to attend Karamah's three-week Summer Leadership Program in WashDC

Goal 3: Maintaining the dialogue about integration between Belgian Muslim and Non-Muslim communities.

Target Audience: Journalists, political leaders, government and non-government organizations working on integration issues

Suggested Programs: Exploring with host governments and local communities the ongoing debate over integration, and offering insights and understanding into the US struggle with integration for Muslims and non-Muslims working on the issues.

In terms of media portrayal, we intend to monitor developments with regard to diversity in the mainstream press and follow up as well as build on the media portrayal conference we organized in June 2006 entitled "Them and Us: Moving Beyond the Cliches."

In FY 07, half of Post's IVs are Muslims: one E academic, one journalist/political party advisor, and one NGO leader of Moroccan origin as well as one Turkish Muslim parliamentarian/Imam. All will look at integration policies and programs.

In FY 08, a series of events centered on the 40th

anniversary of the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., highlighting the U.S. civil rights struggle.

Embassy's Top Three Program Priorities:

Following up on successful past outreach program is absolutely essential to our credibility. Post's program priorities, therefore, reflect this.

1) Visit of Dr. Azizah Al-Hibri, Founder and Director of Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, to deepen and widen discussions about (a) the role and status of women in Islam; (b) setting up a Belgian and eventually a European Karamah center.

2) Co-sponsoring (w/ISNA) six Belgian youth (three Turkish, three Moroccan) as summer interns at ISNA Headquarters.

3) Co-sponsoring (w/KARAMAH) a delegation of five young women to attend Karamah's three-week Summer Leadership Program in WashDC. In FY 06 Post co-sponsored a group of five Francophone women; in FY 07, Post wants to co-sponsor a group of five Flemish women.

Measuring Effectiveness:

Post will track media coverage of Post outreach programs, program attendance and opinions by our Muslim contacts, as well as the number of exchange participants, focusing on minority issues. Since effectiveness cannot be measured by statistics alone, anecdotal evidence will be collected in order to complement this.

KOROLOGOS